

## OBITUARY: DUŠAN ZBAVITEL (1925 – 2012)

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Dr Dušan Zbavitel, a significant Czech Indologist, passed away at the age of 87 on 7 August 2012. He was an outstanding scholar, a tireless popularizer of India, a teacher of Bengali and Sanskrit and a prolific translator whose creative spirit could not be broken even by complicated life circumstances.

Dr Zbavitel was born in Košice, Slovakia, on 7 May 1925. After graduating from a secondary school in Valašské Meziříčí, he studied Indology and Comparative Indo-European Philology at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague. After the defence of his doctoral thesis on the verbal aspect in the Gatha dialect in 1948, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhDr.). In 1955 he received the degree of Candidate of Sciences (CSc.) and in 1965 the highest academic degree, Doctor of Sciences (DrSc).

Dušan Zbavitel started his scholarly career as a researcher at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which he joined after completing his research at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in 1954. The institute gave him the opportunity to use his expertise and organizational skills as head of the South and South East Asia Department, which he managed from 1960, and editor-in-chief of the *Nový Orient* journal (1956 – 1958) and the *New Orient Bimonthly* (1961 – 1968). He was also in charge of author teams collaborating on several popular science publications. Some of the books that Zbavitel edited, for example, *Bozi, bráhmani, lidé: Čtyři tisíciletí hinduismu* [Gods, Brahmins, People: Four Millennia of Hinduism, 1964] or *Moudrost a umění starých Indů* [Wisdom and Arts of Ancient Indians, 1971], as well as other books that he wrote during his nearly twenty years at the institute, are nowadays considered Indology classics. Unfortunately, he was forced to leave his post for political reasons in 1971.

The focus of Zbavitel's research was the study of literature with a particular emphasis on three areas: the work and personality of Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali folk poetry and the history of Bengali literature. All three were subjects of his sound scholarly articles published mainly in the scholarly quarterly *Archiv orientální*, but also in other journals, essay collections, proceedings and book publications both at home and abroad. Many of them were later extended to monographs and widely received in academic circles.

The work and personality of Rabindranath Tagore is the subject of Zbavitel's series of seven scholarly articles entitled *Rabindranath Tagore in 1887 – 1941*

published in *Archiv orientální* (1956 – 1959), research papers published in India besides other countries and the Czech-language monograph *Rabīndranáth Thákur: Vývoj básníka*. [Rabindranath Tagore: The Development of a Poet, Praha, 1961], released on the occasion of the first centennial of the poet's birth. In honour of this anniversary, Dušan Zbavítel prepared three large volumes of Tagore's selected works translated into Czech and equipped with knowledgeable afterwords acquainting the Czech reader with the life and work of this outstanding Bengali author.

Also, Zbavítel's research interest in Bengali folk poetry found expression in several articles, e.g. "The Development of the Baromasi in the Bengali Literature" (*ArOr* 1961) and "Folk Poetry and the Classical Bengali Poetry" (*Folklore* 4, Calcutta 1963), and culminated in the publication of a monograph entitled *Bengali Folk – Ballads from Mymensingh and the Problems of their Authenticity* in Calcutta in 1963, which he had written after a year spent doing research in East Bengal.

The results of Zbavítel's scholarly explorations of the history of Bengali literature were published in several articles, and especially in the publications *The Rise of Modern Literature in Asia, with Special Reference to Bengal* (Calcutta, 1966), *Contributions to the Rise and Development of Modern Literatures in Asia* (1968), and a monograph entitled *Bengali Literature*, published within *A History of Indian Literature* by Otto Harrassowitz in Wiesbaden in 1976. It was reprinted under the title *Bengálská literatura. Od tantrických písní k Rabīndranáthovi Thákurovi* [*Bengali Literature. From Tantric Songs to Rabindranath Tagore*] in Prague in 2008. Holding the post of Secretary General and being the editor of the second volume dedicated to the literatures of South and South East Asia, Zbavítel collaborated on the international project of the *Dictionary of Oriental Literatures* (London 1973).

All three areas of research brought Dušan Zbavítel recognition in India. For his work *Bengali Literature* he was bestowed the Rabīndra puraṣkar award by the Government of West Bengal in 1977. The Folklore Society of India awarded him the title of Lokaratna in 1981, and the Tagore Institute in Calcutta honoured him with the title Rabīndra – tattvācārya in 1987.

To a smaller but not insignificant extent, Zbavítel's research interest focused on the Bengali language, as is exemplified by his monograph *Non-Finite Verbal Forms in Bengali* published in Prague in 1970.

Although Zbavítel had to leave the Oriental Institute, he continued to engage in creative activities. In the coming years and decades he added further monographs to the list of his publications: some of them were written solely by him, others in co-authorship. In 1973 he published a book entitled *Bangladéš. Stát, který sa musel zrodit* [*Bangladesh: A State that Had To Be Born*] and later books on Indian literature (*Setkání a proměny – Encounters and Metamorphoses*, in co-authorship, 1976; *Průvodce dějinami staroindické*

*literature – A Guide to the History of Ancient Indian Literature*, in co-authorship with J. Vacek, 1996), Indian theatre (*Divadlo južnej Ázie – Theatre of South Asia*, 1987; *Pod praporem krále nebes. Divadlo v Indii – Under the Flag of the King of Heaven: Theatre in India*, in co-authorship with D. Kalvodová, 1988), mythology (*Bohové s lotosovými očima – Gods with Lotus Eyes*, in co-authorship, 1987), cultural, spiritual and material development in ancient India (*Starověká Indie – Ancient India*, 1985; *Otazníky starověké Indie – The Question Marks of Ancient India*, 1997), and a complex view on the history of India and India today (*Indie a Indové. Od dávnověku k dnešku – India and Indians: From Ancient Times Until Today*, in co-authorship with M. Krása and D. Marková, 1997). His thin book *Hinduismus a jeho cesty k dokonalosti* [Hinduism and Its Ways to Perfection, 1993] presented a concise view of Hinduism. His three travel books (two of them written in co-authorship) about India constitute a contribution to Czech travel literature. What further contributed to the popularization of India were Zbavitel's numerous articles, lectures, appearances on radio or television and his translations.

Dušan Zbavitel was a remarkably prolific translator – he authored more than 130 translations from Bengali, Sanskrit, Pali, English and German. In the first decades he translated mainly from Bengali. It is to his great merit that Czech readers have the possibility to get acquainted with nearly all the works of Rabindranath Tagore, as well as the works of other Bengali writers, for example, Bibhutibhushan Banerji, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Narayan Gangopadhyay, Samaresh Basu, Abu Ishak, Said Valiullah and Sukanta Bhattacharya. Zbavitel's translations from Pali (*Jatakas*) and from Sanskrit: Somadeva's *Oceán příběhů – The Ocean of Story* (Kathāsaritsāgara 1981); Kautilya's *Arthasāstra* (2002); *O copatých mniších, šibalech a nevěrných manželkách. Příběhy ze staré Indie – On Pig Tail Haired Monks, Jokers and Unfaithful Wives: Stories from Ancient India* (2007) are also worthy of mention. He received great recognition especially for his translation of the *Upanishads*, for which he was awarded the 2004 State Award for Translation. Many of his numerous translations from English or German have also enriched readers' knowledge of various aspects of India's or the Orient's spiritual life, religion, history and culture in a broader sense.

A picture of Zbavitel's versatile personality would not be complete without mentioning his teaching career. A teacher's role was his lifelong destiny. He started teaching after Bengali Studies was opened at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in 1950 and continued teaching there as an external instructor even after he joined the Oriental Institute. After his forced departure from the institute he worked at a language school as a teacher of Bengali and Sanskrit. In 1990 he was allowed to return to the Faculty of Arts as an external lecturer of the history and theory of ancient Indian literature and Hinduism. He wrote the first textbook of Bengali for his students as early as 1953. In 1971 it was followed by another one. This complex and significantly revised textbook was

also issued in a German version under the title *Lehrbuch des Bengalischen* (Heidelberg 1970). In 1987 he became known as the author of a textbook of Sanskrit, which was later revised in co-authorship with J. Strnad and republished in 2007. This area of Zbavitel's activity also received recognition in the form of a Charles University Gold Medal that he was awarded in 1995.

Dušan Zbavitel received the highest recognition of his work in India, where he was honoured with the 2006 Padma Bhushan Award, a high-ranking civilian decoration conferred by the Government of India. Since its launch in 1950 the award has been bestowed only upon a very small number of non-Indians. Dušan Zbavitel won it for literature and education, which comprises all of his activities: his research, teaching, popularization and translation activities.

Dr. Dušan Zbavitel's life journey came to an end on 7 August 2012. His rich life's work may seem concluded as no new works will come from his pen. However, many of his works, if not most of them, will remain of permanent value in Indology and will serve as a source of inspiration for the next generations of Indologists. And his translations, especially those from Bengali, Sanskrit and Pali, will always be the crown jewels of our libraries. Dušan Zbavitel must also be credited for the beginnings of Indology in Slovakia: it was introduced to the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences by his student, the author of this obituary.

May the good deeds that he did in this life of his bring him good fortune in his next incarnation.

Literature used:

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